

Sharing food photographs on social media: performative Xiaozi lifestyle in Young, middle-class Chinese urbanites' WeChat 'Moments'

Altman Yuzhu Peng

Sharing food photographs on social media is on the rise. This act has become increasingly popular in younger generation urban Chinese users' everyday use of WeChat, the popular social media application. In this article, I argue that self-presentation provides an angle to understand aspects of young, middle-class urbanites' food- photograph sharing. This article comprises an eight-month project, conducting netnographic research of 16 young, middle- class Chinese urbanites' WeChat usage. Through the netnographic research, I discovered that, by displaying geotagged snapshots of food, these young urbanites disclose their everyday consumer experience in particular urban spaces. Aspects of this practice feed into these urbanites' performance of Xiaozi tastes, facilitating the self-presentation of their class distinction. The outcomes of the research provide a glimpse into the interplay between post-reform consumerism, Xiaozi lifestyle, and social media usage in the urban, middle-class Chinese younger generation's everyday lives.

Keywords

Food photographs; Xiaozi; middle-class; young urbanites; self-presentation; WeChat

Introduction

In urban China, Xiaozi lifestyle has been on the rise (Xin, 2013, p. 37). Xiaozi refers to a particular set of tastes and lifestyle, aspirational to today's middle-class young urbanites who are keen to define their 'unique' character through consumer behaviour (Henningsen, 2012, p. 411). By consuming the 'correct' brands/products, these young urbanites have been showing their aspirations to Xiaozi lifestyle in order to emphasize their class distinction (Henningsen, 2012, p. 411). The rise of Xiaozi lifestyle marks the increasingly consumerist nature of contemporary, urban Chinese society (Liu, 2008, p. 208). The existing literature has examined how 'Xiaozi-ness' influences middle-class young urbanites' consumption of particular types of food and beverage (Henningsen, 2012). Yet, little attention has been paid to the convergence of Xiaozi-featured consumer behaviour and mediated self-presentation. The purpose of this article is to address this knowledge gap.

Ever since the emergence of social media, users have been managing their self- impression on personal profiles (boyd, 2014, p. 49). Interestingly, we have witnessed an emerging popularity of sharing food photographs on social media (McDonnell, 2016, p. 241). This food-themed graphic content communicates

one's food-related consumer experience, opening new opportunities to mediated self-presentation (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 9). With the widespread use of locative services, today's social media applications have further added a new dimension to this self-presentation practice (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 166–167). Studies (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 166–167; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1656) have revealed how Western social media users share food photographs with geotags at fancy restaurants/exclusive clubs to 'show off'. Hjorth and Gu's (2012) ethnographic research in Shanghai touches upon a similar phenomenon; it uncovers how sharing geotagged food photographs relates to young Chinese urbanites' identity performance on locative social media. Building upon the above body of research, this article pays primary attention to geotagged, food-themed content shared by young Chinese urbanites on social media. Rather than providing a complete explanation of the motives behind their practice, this article aims to determine the dynamic interplay between mediated self-presentation, Xiaozi lifestyle, and sharing geotagged food photographs in the urban Chinese context.

In this article, I argue that sharing geotagged food photographs comprises aspects of young, middle-class Chinese urbanites' everyday communication of their Xiaozi tastes and lifestyle. Uploading food photographs on one's social media profile not only displays the dishes that the user is served, but also presents a specific food consumer experience of him/her (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 9). Sharing these photographs with friends alongside geotags, this consumer experience embodies the user's judgement of taste, feeding into his/her mediated self-presentation on social media. In post-reform China, we have seen how people's society increasingly relies on mediated interactions. This socio-technical context provides an interesting field for the analysis of young middle-class Chinese urbanites' performance of Xiaozi-ness, which sheds light on the post-reform stratification of the Chinese society.

As aspects of a large, continuous research project, the present research gathered data from netnographic research of young Chinese urbanites' use of WeChat, which comprises both observations of the participants' user-generated content and follow-up interviews with each of them. WeChat is best described as a cross between WhatsApp and Instagram; it allows users to not only exchange instant messages but also share graphic content, known as 'Moments', with friends (Peng, 2017, p. 265). Geotagging services are incorporated in the 'Moments'. Young Chinese urbanites are, broadly, early adopters and active users of WeChat (Peng, 2017, p. 265). Their regular use of the application makes this social media platform ideal for the present research. Through the present research, I find that many of my participants share food consumer experience in a highly reflexive mode – demonstrated by their selective display of food-themed content in WeChat 'Moments'. The

selectiveness is typically invoked as the participants upload food photographs with geotags at particular locations. This reveals the potential of this content for the self-presentation of young Chinese urbanites' Xiaozhi tastes and lifestyle. This potential is, indeed, confirmed by many participants in the follow-up interviews; it showcases how the consumerist-defined tastes and lifestyles are reflected in their everyday use of social media.

Post-reform China and young middle-class urbanites

Contemporary China is currently undergoing rapid socio-cultural changes. These changes have arguably been driven by the launch of the 'reform and open' policy in the late 1970s, which transformed the socialist Chinese economic system into a market-led one, and opened its once-closed border to foreign businesses, as well as travellers (Long, Kuang, & Buzzanell, 2013, p. 247). The reform has significantly boosted the economic growth of China, although the imbalance of rural/urban development has also been widely covered (Yeoh, 2010, pp. 260–261). Due to the government's insufficient support for the agricultural sectors, many rural households still live in relative poverty, compared to their city-dwelling contemporaries (Goodman, 2014, pp. 40–41). Urbanites are the beneficiaries of the post-reform era; many of them have become the spine of the emerging middle-class population who sustain the stability of the contemporary China's socio-economic structure (Goodman, 2014, pp. 92–94).

The characters of middle-class Chinese urbanites have been significantly (re)shaped by the emerging consumerism in post-reform, urban China (Xin, 2013, p. 29). Consumerism is an ideology that stimulates mass consumption by turning people into consumers and changing their consumer behaviours (Swagler, 1997, pp. 172–173). Through large-scale surveys, Bourdieu (1984, p. 56) has revealed how the Western middle class is (re)produced through their everyday consumption of particular types of food, music and art. The formation of Chinese middle-class refers to a similar process (Liu, 2008, p. 193); however, this process is based on the material prosperity of urban China and the global cultural flows coming from overseas. Together, these two factors give the importance to consumerism in middle-class Chinese urbanites' everyday lives (Liu, 2008, p. 193).

The changing pattern of food consumption provides a good illustration of consumerism in urban Chinese society. Before the reform, all Chinese people's food consumption was strictly controlled in a planned, socialist economic system (Grunert et al., 2011, p. 357). While many households suffered starvation, having extravagant or luxurious food was considered to be immoral. However, the material prosperity of the post-reform era has led to the flourishing of restaurant businesses in urban China (Grunert et al., 2011, p. 359). More and more

middle-class urbanites choose to dine out because of the convenient yet exclusive services provided by the restaurants (Grunert et al., 2011, p. 359). In this sense, middle-class Chinese urbanites' food consumption is not only to satisfy, but is also associated with personal comfort – an essential element of life experience valued by middle-class households (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56).

The rise of consumerism leads to the changing ethos of post-reform Chinese society (Liu, 2008, p. 193). China was famous for its collectivistic tradition, which considers each individual as an integral component of a coherent socio-organism (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014, p. 266). Such a view still functions in the ecosystem of the countryside (Miller et al., 2016, pp. 188–189). However, its importance has been superseded by the individualistic culture in urban China, where the individuality of a person is more respected (Miller et al., 2016, pp. 188–189). Individualism emphasizes the autonomy and diversity of each person (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014, p. 266) and its rise in urban China have created a new middle-class morality in which the responsibility of social wellbeing has shifted away from the government onto the individual (Talmacs, 2017, p. 6). It encourages middle-class urbanites to pursue personal comfort ahead of the common good (Kolstad & Gjesvik, 2014, p. 266).

The individualistic culture of post-reform urban China underlines the development of middle-class urbanites' self-reflexivity (Gao, 2016, p. 1,203). According to Giddens (1991, p. 75), self-reflexivity is a capacity that enables one to see him/herself as autonomous, and to recognize the value of his/her own feelings. Contextualizing this within a consumer society, self-reflexivity encourages the middle-class population to consume cultural products in ever-increasing amounts, so as to satisfy their personal pleasure (Giddens, 1991, p. 75). This personal pleasure can be seen as a nexus of consumerism and individualism; it is driven by the middle-class desire that Bourdieu (1984, p. 56) notes: a cultural distinction from the lower, working class.

Middle-class Chinese urbanites are not a homogenized group. In particular, age represents an important predictor that influences the characters that the members of a social group share (KPMG, 2014, p. 1). Having been raised in the post-reform era, young urbanites who were born after the 1980s are the privileged beneficiaries of the post-reform economic growth (Liu, 2011, p. 58). The government's three-decade drive for fertility control, furthermore, made them an only-child generation who are focused-upon in the home (Ong & du Cros, 2012, p. 748). Receiving abundant financial support from their parents, these young urbanites are generally experienced in pursuing personal pleasure through consumer brands/products (Liu, 2011, p. 58). This heightens their individualistic characters and self-reflexive capacity, encouraging them to live a consumerist-defined, middle-class lifestyle (Liu, 2011, p. 58). These

young urbanites form the most unique social group of contemporary Chinese society (KPMG, 2014, p. 1).

Towards an understanding of young, middle-class urbanites' self- presentation Self-presentation provides an angle to analyse how young, middle-class Chinese urbanites celebrate their unique identity. Self-presentation explains how a person manages their self-impression when engaging in interpersonal communications (Chambers, 2013, p. 62). Through the observation of urban lives in the US, Goffman (1959) found how people present their identities through the communication of deliberate gestures (e.g. manner) and non-verbal signs (e.g. dress style) (Chambers, 2013, p. 70). Building upon Goffman's (1959) approach, Butler (1988, p. 528) specifically observed the social construction of gendered identity. She argues that one's gender identity only becomes manifest when performed through adherence to gendered social norms (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Following Butler's (1988, p. 519) theory, identity is performative; it is self-presented through 'stylized repetition of acts'. Multiple selves can be constructed through and produced for multiple performances (Chambers, 2013, pp. 69–70).

Being middle-class is of a self-presentative nature; it is practised through the performance of particular tastes, which allows the middle class to identify themselves with a 'middle-class' lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). According to Bourdieu (1984, p. 56), tastes are 'manifested preferences', which connote the 'practical affirmation of an inevitable difference' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). A person's tastes are not incidentally given, but culturally shaped by the social class to which he/she belongs (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). Middle-class tastes in particular underscore an 'aesthetic sense', which is embedded in the middle-class population's stylized consumption of particular types of food, music and art (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). These tastes serve as a 'distinctive expression of a privileged position' in society; their performance enables the middle class to distinguish themselves from the lower-class population through an idealistic and aspirational lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56).

Xiaozi

In post-reform China, Xiaozi tastes are commonly embraced by young, middle-class urbanites, representing a unique aspect of their social characters (Liu, 2008, p. 208). The term 'Xiaozi' was originally used as the Chinese translation of 'petite bourgeoisie' (Xin, 2013, p. 37). The rise of consumerism has, however, redefined the negative Marxist connotation of 'Xiaozi' in post-reform, urban China. Nowadays, Xiaozi is associated with young, middle-class Chinese urbanites' privileged social position in Chinese society (Henningsen, 2012, p. 411). Xiaozi-ness is not meant to be explicitly claimed. Being Xiaozi is fluid and can only be implicitly revealed through aspirations to the aesthetic Xiaozi

tastes, which are, in turn, defined by a consumerist-individualist nexus of cultural abilities (Henningsen, 2012, p. 411). In this sense, living a Xiaozi lifestyle is performative, and is invoked by a middle-class desire for self-presentation.

An important aspect of Xiaozi lifestyle refers to the attitude towards foreign consumer brands in the food/beverage industry, which generally originate in developed countries.¹ Due to a series of local foodstuffs safety scandals, food/beverage products imported from developed countries are often considered to be 'of superior quality' to their domestic counterparts in China (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 672). However, rather than a simple guarantee of quality, many foreign-brand restaurants/café are popular among young consumers in urban China, because these establishments also provide them with a 'glocal bridge' to experience the exotic, 'more advanced' cultures (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 673).

For instance, Pizza Hut restaurants and Starbucks cafés are widespread across contemporary urban China (Zhou, 2008, p. 174). The brand image of these foreign establishments has been notably glocalized in the urban Chinese context through interactions between these businesses' strategic branding and local young urbanites' everyday consumer practice (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 673). The food and drink offered by these foreign businesses naturally carry exotic characteristics for Chinese consumers. Through careful planning of the interior design of restaurants and the presentation of dishes and drinks served in-house, these businesses are also dedicated to creating the material grounding for a 'posh/sophisticated' impression of their brands (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 675). Alongside the implementation of a deliberate pricing strategy that excludes the majority of the low-income population, one's consumer experience of these restaurants and cafés has been framed into an aspect of the imagined middle-class lifestyle in urban China (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 673). Based on interviews of young Starbucks consumers living in Beijing and Nanjing in 2009, Henningsen (2012) discovered the connections between performative Xiaozi lifestyle and visits to the Western-style café. Her research sheds light on the self-presentation potential of food/beverage consumer experience in urban China. In particular, consumption of Starbucks coffee is understood as a cultural ability (Henningsen, 2012, p. 409). The stylized repetition of this consumer behaviour allows young, middle-class Chinese urbanites to claim class distinction, thus setting themselves apart from the lower class or the elderly generation who are generally less appreciative of foreign cultures (Henningsen, 2012, p. 409).

We have to be aware that the glocalized meanings of a specific foreign brand are relative to 'local economic development and access to foreign goods' (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 673). Over the past three decades, McDonald's and

KFC have been withdrawn from the list of middle-class-associated foreign brands in China, due to the wealth growth (which makes the consumption of these products more affordable) and the lifestyle change (which sees these products as unhealthy) of urban households (Souhu, 2017). Furthermore, Chinese cities are categorized into different 'Tiers' according to their population size and economic development (Chiu, Ip, & Silverman, 2012, p. 78). Tier 1 and 2 cities are the largest and most developed cities, where many foreign consumer brands have long been operating their businesses.² In Tier 1 and 2 cities, many 'mainstream' foreign brands have become affordable and possibly turned into 'ordinary' consumer choices for the wealthy group of young urbanites, who are familiar with foreign consumerism. Compared to the rest of their peers, these urban youths and young adults are more likely to pursue more exclusive experiences for the satisfaction of their performative middle-class desires.

Mediated self-presentation

Social media applications are technologies allowing users to construct public or semi-public profiles through which they can share user-generated content with friends (boyd, 2014, pp. 11–12). Social media provide users with the opportunity for controlled and imaginative self-presentation (Papacharissi, 2011, p. 307), enabling them to manage the display of user-generated content on their personal profiles and associate this content with their dynamic everyday practice to perform their tastes and lifestyle (boyd, 2014, p. 49). Social media users' self-presentation has two technological bases. Firstly, digital cameras have become an essential component of today's mobile phones (Riviere, 2005, p. 168). These cameras allow young urbanites to archive episodes of their everyday lives anytime and anywhere, providing the user-generated content that they can share on social media. The existing scholarship around mediated self-presentation tends to focus on photographs in which users occupy a dominant position (e.g. selfies) (Bakhshi, Shamma, & Gilbert, 2014; Mehdizadeh, 2010). Yet, increasingly more research notes that many social media users upload snapshots of food to record their exclusive dining-out experience in cities as well (Johnston & Goodman, 2015; Lavis, 2017). A stylized display of the food photographs embodies a user's consumer tastes, showcasing a class distinction (McDonnell, 2016, p. 241). This act has served as an emerging approach for social media users' self-presentation (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 9).

Furthermore, increasingly more social media applications are designed for mobile usage (boyd, 2014, p. 6). The GPS equipment on mobile phones also now allows social media users to generate graphic content alongside geotags to indicate the location from where it is generated and uploaded (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 699). The digital camera and the geotagging service together infuse mediated self-presentation with the dynamics between food-themed

graphic content and stylized urban life experience. Through the case studies of Instagram, Facebook and Foursquare, Schwartz and Halegoua (2015, p. 1656) have discovered how Western users express their identities by sharing food photographs with geotags at particular restaurants. The interplay between self-presentation and stylized urban life experience is not a Western phenomenon. Through ethnographic research, Hjorth and Gu (2012) noted the popularity of sharing locative-aware, food-themed content among Chinese social media users too. Their research captures how Shanghai young people use geotagged food photographs to share their exclusive food consumer experience at posh restaurants with friends on Chinese locative social media, Jiebang3 (2012, p. 707).

Released by giant internet company Tencent, the statistics show that WeChat was used by almost 850 million people in 2017, rendering it the most popular social media platform in China (Peng, 2017, p. 265). Typical Chinese users spend on average 40 minutes per day on WeChat (DMR, 2016, p. n.p.). A survey conducted in Beijing shows that over 85% of young Chinese urbanites have shared food photographs on social media; almost three-quarters of these were uploaded via WeChat accounts (Yuan, 2017, pp. 4–5). WeChat is representative of the social media platforms where young Chinese urbanites organize and publicize their everyday social lives (Peng, 2017, p. 265). An in-depth analysis of the geotagged, food-themed content that these urbanites share on WeChat helps us to find out the coherence of young Chinese urbanites' mediated self-presentation, their class distinction and urban life experiences in post-reform China.

Research methods and data collection

This article presents an eight-month netnographic research of 16 young Chinese urbanites' use of WeChat. Netnography is a form of ethnography which incorporates interactive media (e.g. social media) into fieldwork (Kozinets, 2015, p. 79). It is increasingly used to analyse the cultures emerging among social media users (Kozinets, 2015, p. 5). The data collection of a netnographic piece of research typically employs participant observations and interviews (Peng, 2017, p. 266).

In the present research, the 16 participants, including 6 men and 10 women, were recruited on a voluntary basis in 2014. As aspects of a continuous research project, the present data collection was conducted between July 2016 and February 2017. The research participants were previously recruited in July 2014 from a chosen Chinese university (male/female ratio: 1/1.15). The university is chosen because it is an independent institute located in a representative Tier 2 city. An independent institute is a private higher education institution affiliated to a reputable public university; its tuition fees are much higher than those of its public counterparts (Zhu & Lou, 2011, p. 82).

Students of a typical middle-class background are likely to be found at such a university. The participant recruitment survey was initially distributed to 16,400 undergraduates at the university via email. A total of 140 students replied to the email with their contact details. Sixteen participants⁴ were chosen as the research participants because of their regular use of WeChat, and their middle-class family background (i.e. their parents are either professionals or operating private businesses). These participants were aged between 22 and 27 in 2017. They either continue studying at university, or now have a professional occupation (e.g. teachers or office workers) in cities (10 live in Tier 1 and 2 cities; the rest are in Tier 3 cities).

During the netnographic research, I observed these participants' WeChat 'Moments'. The food-themed content that they shared in 'Moments' was archived and thematically categorized into: (1) food photographs; and (2) photographs of food and people (i.e. where both people and food appear in the photographs). The food photograph type was focused. Visual-abstraction technique⁵ was used to analyse the interplay between the participants' food photograph posts and their mediated self-presentation. I also conducted individual interviews with each of the participants and continuously interacted with them via instant messages, to compare the results of my visual abstraction to the participants' own interpretation. Given the privacy of the communication occurring on social media, the participants were notified with the procedure of the present netnographic research with an information sheet, and were requested to sign a consent form before participating in the present research. They are provided with pseudonyms in this article.

The sample size of the present research was relatively small; yet, these participants represented a wide range of characteristics regarding both their personality and their patterns of WeChat usage. Given the exploratory nature of the present research, these participants provide sufficient qualitative data for my analysis. The research findings certainly cannot be overgeneralized to describe the practice of the whole young Chinese population; however, the outcomes of the present research indeed provide a window to the mediated self-presentation and Xiaozhi performance practised by these urbanites – a leading edge of young aspirants who lead social media usage in urban China.

Food photographs and self-presentation in practice

Resonating with the survey of young urbanites' social media use conducted in Beijing (Yuan, 2017, pp. 4–5), my netnographic observations noted that food photographs form a notable part of the content that my participants share in WeChat 'Moments' – the functional feature of WeChat that allows users to share graphic content with friends. My follow-up interviews showed that these food photographs were mainly taken by my participants with their own

mobile phones.

Photographs are 'created through movement'; therefore, are 'part of a world that is always in forward motion' (Pink, 2011, p. 9). A food photograph seems to be still but represents the dynamic moment when being taken (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1647). In this case, it spontaneously records the dynamic moment of the users' ephemeral food consumer experience (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 1). In the past, cameras were mainly used to record and celebrate memorable moments in family lives, such as weddings, given the fact that the size of the cameras of that time rendered them unsuitable for mobile usage (Riviere, 2005, p. 168). However, digital cameras have become an integral part of today's mobile phones, which users always have to hand nowadays (Riviere, 2005, p. 168). Today's users take photographs whenever and wherever they wish to. They are able to preserve any fleeting life experience using the camera lens of their mobile phone (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 699). The preservation of ephemeral food consumer experience is not only for one's own pleasure; sharing also comprises a crucial part of this act. Wu, 27-year-old, female: WeChat 'Moments' is for sharing the interesting episodes in my life. Having delicious food with friends is an essential part of these episodes [...]; it makes me happy [...]. Posting food photographs allows me to share these happy moments to other friends.

Food photographs, fitting into the broader category of user-generated content, are shared by young Chinese urbanites to inform social interactions on WeChat, given the fact that social media are mainly used for communication with friends/family (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 702). In particular, in China, dining together has long been a friendly gesture; it is also still popularly used for establishing rapport between business partners (Standiford & Marshall, 2000, p. 22). Contextualizing within this specific cultural context, dining out with friends naturally forms a social event in which friendship is tightened between young Chinese urbanites. Sharing photographs that record social events in WeChat 'Moments' is an extension of this social networking practice in everyday use of social media.

It emerged from the interviews that, for many participants, the food snapshots they uploaded in 'Moments' were taken while having meals with friends/family. However, instead of the friends/family members, the food served was the principal character presented. Figure 1, for instance, shows a typical example. This post describes participant Zhong's (female, 27-year-old) dining-out experience with friends through snapshots of food rather than of friends; the caption emphasizes that 'friendship is more important than food served'. In this instance, the 'true' principal characters were hidden from other users' scrutiny. A notion of intimacy was communicated between those who participated in the gathering. As 'disclosing intimacy acts as a marker

that defines authentic friendship' (Chambers, 2013, p. 47), sharing these food photographs forms an opportunity for exclusive communication of intimacy, feeding into urban Chinese young adults' every-day management of friendship on WeChat.

However, being shared on social media, the meaning of food photographs goes far beyond the communication of intimacy between those who participated in the meal (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 709). Given its public/semi-public accessibility, the user-generated content made available on one's social media profile is also revealed to 'acquaintances', who might have found it inappropriate or difficult to gather personal information in other ways (Chambers, 2013, p. 90). This accessibility is particularly important for estranged friends, who sometimes want to compare each other's lives (Lambert, 2016, p. 2,570). As participant Tao (26-year-old, male) noted: '[food photographs] show aspects of my life status, [...] the aspects that I am happy to be known to my friends'. In this sense, the food photographs that these young urbanites share in 'Moments' also comprise self-presentation potential.

Unlike sharing selfies, which are an explicit self-portrayal of appearance/body, the potential of sharing food photographs involves a nuanced, implicit, or even non-intentional process; it represents the dynamics between consumerism and visual preservation of mundane life episodes, which celebrate the 'notion of the exhibit and the spectacle inviting gaze through everyday objects and rituals' (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 1). By using particular photography and post-processing techniques, food celebrities regularly produce aesthetic snapshots of homemade, mouth-watering food that transform 'ordinary' ingredients into 'extraordinary' dishes (Johnston & Goodman, 2015, p. 212). The food photographs not only exhibit the authentic food but also turn having food into a spectacularized, gaze-inviting ritual (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 1). This 'spectacularization' of everyday ritual things emphasizes both the realness and the attractiveness of food celebrities; it serves their self-branding, as well as the promotion of their food blogs amongst followers (Johnston & Goodman, 2015, p. 212). With the widespread prevalence of professionally made food photographs, many ordinary users have learned to use the same techniques to redefine authentic dining gatherings into an aesthetic consumer experience (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 8). Such a practice was discovered in my netnographic observations, reflecting how young Chinese urbanites use close-up shots to capture the fine detail of food. Figure 2 provides a representative example retrieved from the 'Moments' of 25-year-old female participant Wang. The aspirational nature of the food that she was served was clearly emphasized by the vivid colour and attractive appearance of the dishes captured in the photographs.

The way in which young Chinese urbanites make their 'authentic' food consumer experience 'aspirational' reveals the performativity of food photograph sharing on social media (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 8). This act parallels Bourdieu's (1984) observation of how the Western middle-class mimic the upper-class emphasis on the originality and exoticness of the food they consume. As Bourdieu (1984, p. 79) notes, one's judgements of taste around food are associated with social positioning, 'an interesting indicator of the mode of self-presentation adopted in showing off a lifestyle'. On a social media profile, one's display of intentionally made aspirational food consumer experience shows one's aesthetic tastes around food. This act resonates with Butler's (1988) theory of performative identity; it forms a mediated expression of the one's cultural trajectory, shaped by class-based consumer ambition (McDonnell, 2016, pp. 241–242). In the case of young, middle-class Chinese urbanites, performative Xiaozi tastes and lifestyle reflect this consumerist, cultural trajectory.

Performative Xiaozi tastes and lifestyle

Xiaozi tastes and lifestyle to a certain extent regulate young, middle-class Chinese urbanites' navigation of food consumer experience (Xin, 2013, p. 37). In WeChat 'Moments', this navigation is embodied through sharing of food photographs. My netnographic observations noted that foreign food and beverage franchises form a popular category of dining-out locations in young Chinese urbanites' everyday lives. Specifically, food photographs taken at these chains were found in 13 participants' 'Moments' posts. Starbucks is typical of this category. Figure 3 shows an example retrieved from participant Tao's 'Moments'. A snapshot of a mug of coffee was displayed in this 'Moments' post. Its caption clarified that the coffee was a particular type of 'Latte', a flagship product of Starbucks of that time, that Tao ordered many times. The snapshot, alongside the rhetoric used in the caption, implicitly reveals the 26-year-old man's aspirational view towards this foreign brand.

Starbucks is one of the foreign pioneers which introduced Western food consumer culture (e.g. having coffee and sandwiches for breakfast/brunch) to the urban Chinese population (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 678). Starbucks cafés constitute a symbolic, cultural-spatial knot, where the 'West' meets the 'East' in post-reform Chinese cities. Chinese anti-globalization activists deem the brand as a carrier of cultural imperialism, which threatens the continuity of the local culture (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 672). In 2007, for instance, a high-profile protest forced Starbucks to shut down its café, which had opened inside the Forbidden City – the most symbolic relic of China's cultural heritage (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 670). However, Starbucks has a very different cultural connotation for young, middle-class urbanites, who embrace the Xiaozi lifestyle and are aspiring to the cosmopolitan (Henningsen, 2012, p. 409). Having a mug of coffee at a Starbucks in the centre of urban China is

both authentic and aspirational; it is not only an everyday ritual, but also forms an act allowing these young urbanites to escape from rustic, traditional China and to experience the cosmopolitan (Henningsen, 2012, p. 410). This consumer practice embodies an affirmation of these urbanites' cultural connectedness to the foreign/exotic, rendering them closer to their fantasy of being Xiaozi (Maguire & Hu, 2013, p. 679).

In WeChat 'Moments', the cultural connectedness of young Chinese urbanites is visually embodied through the photographs which describe their consumer experience of foreign food and beverage brands. The performativity of this visual embodiment is enhanced when a locative dimension of the consumer behaviour is intentionally highlighted (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 166–167). Since the emergence of locative services, users are able to specify the location from where they generate content on social media (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1,657). The locative feature of WeChat allows users to easily announce their whereabouts by attaching geotags to a 'Moments' post. These geotags could be either general (a city) or specific (a street, park or coffee shop). WeChat users have complete control over the display of geotags; this means that the geotags attached to 'Moments' posts not only record these users' discrete footprints in the city, but also illustrate their bodily engagement with the city that they want to share with friends (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, pp. 166–167). The geotagging act invites the gaze of friends, enabling them to perform aspects of themselves on the social media platform (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1657).

Revisiting Tao's 'Moments', I noted that he is an active user of the locative feature; his 'Moments' posts were almost always supplemented by geotags (see Figure 4). It becomes apparent that Tao was enthusiastic about revealing his 'footprints' at Starbucks cafés: the participant tended to provide 'Moments' posts with less-specific geotags unless he was visiting branches of the foreign brand.⁶ The highlighted 'footprints' at Starbucks establishments show that the visits to the chain represent a particular consumer experience that he has been intentionally performing in 'Moments'.

The locative dimension of consumer behaviour underlines the inextricable link between Xiaozi lifestyle and the spatiality of everyday lives in post-reform, urban China. Urban spaces are constructed upon people's socially organized encounters with places in the city (Moores, 2012, pp. 27–28). According to de Certeau (1984, p. 117), place relates to the pre-existing architecture and objects that people can see when passing through; it is built upon a specific location (Moores, 2012, p. 28). Space is, then, a 'practised place' constructed in relation to people's subjective engagement with the place (de Certeau, 1984, p.117). Spaces are ephemeral; they only emerge when dwellers interact with the architecture, the geographic arrangements, the objects and the

other people in a specific location. This place-space dichotomy provides a way to contest the subjectivity of individuals to creatively derive meaning from the place they reside in. The construction of urban spaces is inherently social; thus, people's mobility in urban areas provides a glimpse into the dynamics between social class, places and the city (Wilson, 1992, p. 8). By attaching geotags to graphic content, the spatial aspect of social media users' urban life experience is emphasized (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1650). The discrete archives of geotags allow users to display their unique daily pattern of socio-spatial mobility (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012, p. 166). A series of discrete locative archives serves as a window into the users' stylized spatial experience of the city, feeding into their self-presentation on social media (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1650). In Tao's case, the intentionally highlighted geotags at Starbucks cafés aligned his bodily engagement with a symbolic urban space and personal recommendation of food consumer experience there (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015, p. 1653). The continuous repetition of this socio-spatial nexus stylizes Tao's consumer behaviour, backing up his tastes of food with concrete spatial evidence. It frames an aspect of his daily routine that is performed in accordance with his Xiaozi characteristics.

The ambivalent attitude towards consumerism

All that being said, Xiaozi-ness is not a fixed, but a fluid, life status. Its fluidity and socio-economic condition determine that Xiaozi tastes around a specific consumer brand are ambivalent because of emphasis on the exclusiveness of consumer experience (Henning-sen, 2012, p. 419). This ambivalence provides the contextualized grounding for young, middle-class urbanites' practice of performative Xiaozi tastes and lifestyle on WeChat. Taking participant Zhong, for instance, the 27-year-old female white-collar worker said that she also consumes Starbucks on a daily basis. However, the geotagging clues indicating this consumer behaviour of hers were almost never found in her 'Moments'. Instead, my observations of her food-themed content revealed her emphasis of exclusive food consumption: her dining-out experience often took place at styled restaurants – those which are seen as 'posh' and 'exotic' but are relatively less known to the masses in urban China. The character of the restaurants in which she dined was captured by the food photographs (see Figure 5 7), which present the interior design of the establishments, as well as the dishes served.

It is worthwhile mentioning that Zhong obtained her master's degree in a British university. Having been immersed in the anglicized culture for almost two years, drinking coffee and having Western friends has already become an essential aspect of Zhong's lifestyle. Dining with friends at posh restaurants which entail Britishness facilitates the recollection of her memories of living in the UK, while at the same time – intentionally or not – presenting an aspect of

Zhong's Xiaozi-ness.

Yet, Zhong's aspiration to specific foreign consumer brands is clearly wobbling. Zhong dislikes revealing her consumer experience at Starbucks cafés, although she visits there regularly as well. This is not only because consumption at Starbucks has turned into a routine ritual in her life which is not worthwhile sharing anymore; more importantly, it relates to the participant's middle-class self-reflexivity which invokes her desire for the 'exclusivity' of her performative Xiaozi tastes and lifestyle. In the interview of Zhong, the participant expressed her scorn of her peers who often share food photographs taken at Starbucks cafés or Pizza Hut restaurants and defined them as the 'Tier 3 philistines who have no real tastes'. Zhong consumes these brands but this consumer experience is intentionally neglected when she uploads food photographs in 'Moments'. She is representative of the Xiaozi group who have more consumer power and who seek more exclusive life experiences. Appreciation of this exclusive experience distances this group from the other young urbanites whose behaviour is 'overwhelmingly' influenced by mass consumerism.

From the above example, we can see that Xiaozi lifestyle is indeed of a consumerist nature, but it does not completely follow the market (Henningsen, 2012, p. 411). On the contrary, the self-reflexivity and individualism, a pair of key characteristics of Xiaozi-ness, infuse a level of 'anti-market' into young, middle-class urbanites' performative lifestyle (Gao, 2016, p. 1204). This paradoxically encourages them to oppose the brands which have become obviously 'mainstream' (Henningsen, 2012, p. 422). Regarding these foreign consumer brands, such as Starbucks and Pizza Hut, this seemingly anti-market feature of Xiaozi-ness is notably shared by young urbanites living in Tier 1 and 2 cities. In the present research, I noted that participants of this kind often comprise shared characteristics. They either have physically lived or travelled abroad, or have good friends and relatives who have overseas life experience. Tier 1 and 2 cities are generally more developed and more cosmopolitan than those in Tier 3 (Chiu et al., 2012, p. 78). Living in Tier 1 and 2 cities provides these young urbanites with more opportunities to experience foreign consumerism. With this experience, they no longer consider the 'mainstream' consumer brands as aspirational. They have been developing a different set of Xiaozi norms to distance themselves from their 'rustic' peers living in Tier 3 cities.

This seemingly anti-consumerism of Xiaozi performance represents a desire for class distinction between young Chinese urbanites, who seem to share much in common. In this sense, Xiaozi tastes and lifestyle have started showing class varieties. The young, middle-class urbanites who hold more consumer power do not passively accept foreign consumerism, but are highly reflexive in

practising consumption (Gao, 2016, p. 1203). This self-reflexivity renders their pursuit of the exclusive accessibility through customized consumer experience (Johnston & Goodman, 2015, p. 213). However, while these wealthy youths and young adults strive to distance themselves from the mainstream Xiaozi tastes, their lifestyle paradoxically returns to the rationale of consumerism. As the 'only-child' generation living in urban China, with a high level of material prosperity, these young, middle-class Chinese urbanites value their 'exclusive' Xiaozi lifestyle (Gao, 2016, p. 1203). However, this 'exclusivity' has to be expressed through their everyday consumer behaviour. It engenders new ostentatious features of Xiaozi lifestyle that are still part of the ubiquitous consumer culture of post-reform, urban China (Henningsen, 2012, p. 422). The consumerist essence of these urbanites' food-photograph sharing in WeChat 'Moments' alongside that of their peers underscores the interplay between Xiaozi lifestyle, food consumption and mediated self-presentation in their everyday use of social media.

Conclusion

In this article, I have uncovered the interplay between Xiaozi lifestyle, food consumption, and mediated self-presentation through a case study of young, middle-class Chinese urbanites' use of WeChat. In post-reform, urban China, dining-out defines a notable part of the emerging middle-class lifestyle (Grunert et al., 2011, p. 357). This lifestyle is appreciated in a consumer society – a society in which the middle-class population's consumer behaviours are sensitive to their judgement of taste. For young, middle-class Chinese urbanites, dining at particular restaurants represents aspects of their tastes and lifestyle. These young urbanites share this dining-out experience through uploading geotagged food photographs in WeChat 'Moments' to communicate these tastes. This practice collaterally facilitates these young urbanites' self-presentation; it emerges from a tangled web of consumerism, lifestyle, and mobile social media usage in post-reform, urban China.

The mediated self-presentation occurring in young, middle-class urbanites' everyday use of WeChat is associated with their performative Xiaozi tastes and lifestyle. In particular, the Xiaozi tastes shape their ambivalent attitudes towards globalized foreign brands. While generating geotagged food photographs from the restaurants and cafés of these foreign brands, aspects of these young adults' class distinction in urban China, which feature aspiring to the cosmopolitan, are performed. This sets them apart from the rest of the Chinese population, serving their middle-class desires for class distinction. However, these young adults' attitude towards 'main-streamed' foreign consumer brands is wobbling, because their self-reflexive capacity continues to encourage them to pursue more and more exclusive consumer experiences. This paradoxical pursuit of accessibility and exclusivity is also embodied in their food-photograph sharing; it exploits and feeds into the in-

group class distinction between young, middle-class urbanites, who form a seemingly homogenized group. This in-group variety has marked the consumerist essence of these young urbanites' mediated self-presentation on social media, which frames an increasingly important aspect of the socio-cultural characters with which they are identified in post-reform, urban Chinese society.

References

- Bakhshi, S., Shamma, D. A., & Gilbert, E. (2014). Faces engage us: Photos with faces attract more likes and comments on Instagram. In Proceedings of the 32nd annual ACM conference on Human factors in computing systems – CHI '14 (pp. 965–974). doi:10.1145/2556288.2557403
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- boyd, D. M. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. London: Yale University Press.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519–531.
- Chambers, D. (2013). *Social media and personal relationships: Online intimacies and networked friendship*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.
- Chiu, C., Ip, C., & Silverman, A. (2012). Understanding social media in China. *McKinsey Quarterly*, 2, 78– 81.
- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- de Souza e Silva, A., & Frith, J. (2012). *Mobile interfaces in public spaces: Locational privacy, control, and urban sociability*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- DMR. (2016). 83 amazing WeChat statistics (November 2016). Retrieved from <http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/wechat-statistics/>
- Gao, Y. (2016). Inventing the 'authentic self: American television and Chinese audiences in global Beijing. *Media, Culture & Society*, 38(8), 1201–1217. doi:10.1177/0163443716635870
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Redwood, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Goodman, D. (2014). *Class in contemporary China*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- Grunert, K. G., Perrea, T., Zhou, Y., Huang, G., Sørensen, B. T., & Krystallis, A. (2011). Is food-related life-style (FRL) able to reveal food consumption patterns in non-western cultural environments? Its adaptation and application in urban China. *Appetite*, 56(2), 357–367. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2010.12.020
- Henningsen, L. (2012). Individualism for the masses? Coffee consumption and the Chinese middle class' search for authenticity. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 13(3), 408–327. doi:10.1080/14649373.2012.689709
- Hjorth, L., & Gu, K. (2012). *The place of emplaced visualities: A case study of*

smartphone visibility and location-based social media in Shanghai, China.

Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 26 (5), 699–713.

Ibrahim, Y. (2015). Food porn and the invitation to gaze: Ephemeral consumption and the digital spectacle. *International Journal of E-Politics*, 6(3), 1–12. doi:10.4018/IJEP.2015070101

Johnston, J., & Goodman, M. K. (2015). Spectacular foodscapes: Food celebrities and the politics of lifestyle mediation in an age of inequality. *Food, Culture, and Society*, 18(2), 205–222. doi:10.2752/175174415X14180391604369

Kolstad, A., & Gjesvik, N. (2014). Collectivism, individualism, and pragmatism in China: Implications for perceptions of mental health. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 51(2), 264–285.

Kozinets, R. V. (2015). *Netnography: Redefined* (2nd ed.).

London: Routledge. KPMG. (2014). The rise of the urban “post-90s”

generation in China. Retrieved from <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2014/12/China-360-volumes-2014-KPMG.pdf>

Lambert, A. (2016). Intimacy and social capital on Facebook: Beyond the psychological perspective.

New Media & Society, 18(11), 2559–2575. doi:10.1177/1461444815588902

Lavis, A. (2017). Food porn, pro-anorexia and the viscosity of virtual affect: Exploring eating in cyber- space. *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, 84, 198–205. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.05.014

Liu, F. (2008). Constructing the autonomous middle-class self in today’s China: The case of young- adult only-children university students. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11(2), 193–212. doi:10.1080/13676260701800746

Liu, F. (2011). *Urban youth in China: Modernity, the internet, and the self*.

Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis. Long, Z., Kuang, K., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2013).

Legitimizing and elevating telework: Chinese constructions of a nonstandard work arrangement. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 27(3), 243–262. doi:10.1177/1050651913479912

Maguire, J. S., & Hu, D. (2013). Not a simple coffee shop: Local, global and glocal dimensions of the consumption of Starbucks in China. *Social Identities*, 19(5), 37–41. doi:10.1080/13504630.2013.835509

McDonnell, E. M. (2016). Food porn: The conspicuous consumption of food in the age of digital reproduction. In *Food, Media and contemporary culture* (pp. 239–265). London: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-1-137-46323-4.

Mehdizadeh, S. (2010). Self-presentation 2.0: Narcissism and self-esteem on Facebook. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 13(4), 357–364. doi:10.1089/cyber.2009.0257

Miller, D., Costa, E., Haynes, N., McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R., Sinanan, J., ... Wang, X. (2016). How the

world changed social media. London: UCL Press.

Moores, S. (2012). *Media, place, and mobility*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ong, C.-E., & du Cros, H. (2012). *The post-mao gazes: Chinese backpackers in*

Macau. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 39(2), 735–754.

doi:10.1016/j.annals.2011.08.004

Papacharissi, Z. (2011). Conclusion: A networked self. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *A networked self: Identity, community and culture on social network sites* (pp. 304–318). New York, NY: Routledge.

Peng, Y. (2017). Affective networks: How WeChat enhances Tencent's digital business governance.

Chinese Journal of Communication, 10(3), 264–278.

doi:10.1080/17544750.2017.1306573

Pink, S. (2011). Sensory digital photography: Re-thinking "moving" and the image'. *Visual Studies*, 26

(1), 4–13. doi:10.1080/1472586X.2011.548484

Riviere, C. (2005). Mobile camera phones: A new form of "being together" in daily interpersonal communication. In R. Ling, & P. E. Pedersen (Eds.), *Mobile communications: Re-negotiation of the social sphere* (pp. 167–185). London: Springer-Verlag.

Schwartz, R., & Halegoua, G. R. (2015). The spatial self: Location-based identity performance on social media. *New Media & Society*, 17(10), 1643–1660.

doi:10.1177/1461444814531364

Souhu. (2017). 肯德基很努力但它已不再是当年的高档西餐厅了 [KFC has tried to change but it is no longer a posh restaurant] [In Chinese]. Retrieved from http://www.sohu.com/a/163276256_413981

Standifird, S. S., & Marshall, R. S. (2000). The transaction cost advantage of Guanxi-based business practices. *Journal of World Business*, 35(1), 21–42.

doi:10.1016/S1090-9516(99)00032-2

Swagler, R. (1997). Modern consumerism. In S. Brobeck (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the consumer movement* (pp. 172–173). Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Talmacs, N. (2017). *China's cinema of class: Audiences and narratives*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Wilson, E. (1992). *The sphinx in the city: Urban life, the control of disorder, and women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Xin, W. (2013). Desperately seeking status: Political, social and cultural attributes of China's rising middle class. *Modern China Studies*, 20(1), 1–44.

Retrieved from <http://ez.sun.ac.za/login?url=>

<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1115592452?accountid=14049%5Cn>,
<http://sunsfx.hosted>.

exlibrisgroup.com/sun?url_ver=Z39.88-

2004&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:journal&genre=article&sid=ProQ:ProQ:abiglobal&atitle=Desperately

Yeoh, E. K.-K. (2010). Changing China: Three decades of social transformation. *International Journal of China Studies*, 1(2), 239–308. Retrieved from <http://repository.um.edu.my/id/eprint/8171>

Yuan, Y. (2017). 社交网站用户食物拍照分享的行为意向研究 [A study of the reasoning behind social media users' sharing of food photographs] [In Chinese]. Beijing Foreign Studies University. Retrieved from <http://cdmd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CDMD-10030-1017173120.htm>

Zhou, X. (2008). Chinese middle class: Reality or illusions. In C. Jaffrelot & P. van der Veer (Eds.), *Patterns of middle-class consumption in India and China* (pp. 110–126). London: Sage.

Zhu, H. Z., & Lou, S. (2011). *Development and reform of higher education in China*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing.